

PRESIDENT TERMED UNREADY TO YIELD ON IRAN ARMS DEAL

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS
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WASHINGTON, March 1 — One of President Reagan's most trusted advisers, former Senator Paul Laxalt, said today that he did not think Mr. Reagan was yet prepared to condemn the reasoning that led to the Iran arms deal.

This impression squares with other advisers who have talked to Mr. Reagan in the last week as he has searched for a way to address the Iran issue that would help him salvage the remaining 23 months of his Presidency. They say that he remains irritated at what he considers to be the "unfairness" of many criticisms of his Iran policy.

Senator Laxalt, who has been in close touch with Mr. Reagan, gave this summary today of his advice to the President: "I'd particularly like to have him, in retrospect, 20-20, look back and say, 'This was a flawed policy.'"

'I Don't Think He's There'

Instead of trying to justify the operation, Mr. Laxalt added, Mr. Reagan should simply say, "It was a trip that shouldn't have been taken."

But in an interview with the ABC News program "This Week With David Brinkley," Mr. Laxalt added: "I'd like to have him do that. But I don't think he's there in his mind yet."

In his State of the Union Message in January, Mr. Reagan acknowledged that "serious mistakes were made" in pursuing the Iran matter. But he blurred the impact of that statement by insisting that "the goals were worthy" and that "it was not wrong" to sell arms to Iran.

Working on Iran Speech

After a week of intense activity, highlighted by the Tower Commission's report on the Iran deal and the selection of Howard H. Baker Jr. as the new chief of staff, the capital relaxed in springlike weather and most White House phones went unanswered. But Mr. Reagan, who had canceled plans to spend the weekend at Camp David, remained in the family quarters, working on a major speech that he plans to deliver later this week.

"The President continues to work on his speech and review the report," said

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Albert R. Brashear, a White House spokesman. "It was a private day."

Mr. Baker will try to patch up the Administration's tattered relations with Capitol Hill on Monday when he is expected to visit Congressional leaders and discuss the Administration's legislative agenda in the wake of the Iran arms scandal.

Mr. Baker has asked Robert C. Byrd, the leader of the Senate's Democratic majority, if he can pay a call on his old colleagues on his first day in his new job, according to a spokesman for Mr. Byrd. The two men, who led rival parties in the Senate for the first four years of the Reagan Presidency, have agreed to the meeting, but have not set a specific time, the aide said.

In an interview, Senator Byrd called Mr. Baker "an excellent choice" who has a "good working relationship with those of us in the Senate." He said the appointment would help repair relations between the White House and Capitol Hill, which suffered under Donald T. Regan, Mr. Baker's predecessor as chief of staff.

"There was a group down there that thought it was us versus them," Senator Byrd said of the White House. "They always threw down the gauntlet. There was a lot of political sniping and finger-pointing."

'Needs to Be More Substance'

However, Mr. Byrd warned: "I don't think the Baker appointment itself can extricate the White House. A lot of information is still coming out, and the investigations are continuing."

Like many lawmakers from both parties, Mr. Byrd said that the President has to "improve his work habits" by getting more involved in the details of government. "There needs to be more substance," he said.

Mr. Baker, who was unexpectedly named last Friday to replace Mr. Regan as chief of staff, cut short a Florida vacation and flew back to the capital this afternoon. When he takes the helm on Monday, a top priority will be supervising the President's speech, an address that could help set the tone for the Administration in the weeks and months ahead.

In a brief interview tonight after returning to Washington, Mr. Baker said: "I expect the President to make a significant speech and look forward to discussing it with him tomorrow. It is the of the things I will have to get my arms around in the next grueling hours and days."

Reaction to Baker on Hill

The surprising choice of Mr. Baker as chief of staff continued to draw comment today from Capitol Hill.

Senator Alan Cranston of California, the Democratic whip, said, "Howard Baker gets to have many of the powers of the Presidency without having to slog around New Hampshire." Mr. Baker has shelved plans to seek the Republican nomination next year.

One Republican strategist cautioned, however, that Mr. Baker's close relationships with many lawmakers could prove a problem because they might deluge him with requests for favors.

Tom Griscom, who was Senator Baker's press secretary, has told friends that he has been asked to be a senior deputy in the chief of staff's office. But Mr. Griscom, who recently took a job with Ogilvie & Mather, a public relations firm, said he was not certain whether to accept the offer.

Another strong candidate for a senior White House post is A. B. Culvahouse, a close associate of Mr. Baker's in his law firm, Vinson & Elkins.

Question of Gates Nomination

Another pressing issue facing the new chief of staff this week will be the nomination of Robert Gates to be Director of Central Intelligence, replacing William J. Casey. White House aides said on Saturday that the nomination of Mr. Gates, who was the deputy director at the time of the arms deal, might have to be withdrawn in the interest of promoting a new and harmonious relationship with Congress.

Mr. Baker described Mr. Gates as a "very able young man," and disclosed that he had recommended him for the director's job after turning it down himself. But the tide seemed to be turning against Mr. Gates on Capitol Hill.

Today, Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, the Republican leader, acknowledged that cancellation of the Gates nomination has "been discussed at the White House." Mr. Dole, who is taking a vote count for the White House on the issue, added on the NBC News program "Meet the Press," "I would guess that there would be some judgment made on this early this week."

Mr. Laxalt, a Nevada Republican, added, "I think the Gates nomination is in trouble." While Mr. Gates is a "proven professional," Mr. Laxalt said he is suffering on Capitol Hill because "he has the smell of Irangate on him."

Be 'Upfront,' Lawmaker Says

In the view of many politicians from both parties, the "smell of Irangate" continues to cling to the President as well. That is why they are counseling him to move boldly to distance himself from the whole scandal.

Representative Dick Cheney of Wyoming, the senior Republican on the House committee that is investigating the Iran-Nicaragua affair, said of Mr. Reagan: "He's got to be very upfront in accepting the Tower report for what it is — a very tough, hard-hitting, but objective criticism of his Administration. He's got to admit that the policy was flawed, and that he was responsible for it. I hope he'll do that."

As the fallout from the Tower Commission report continued to settle on the capital, former Senator Edmund S. Muskie, who served on the panel with former Senator John G. Tower, the chairman, and Brent Scowcroft, a retired Air Force general, said of the President, "Politically, I doubt that he will ever again be the dominant figure that he was, say, six months ago."

Mr. Muskie, a Maine Democrat, said on the CBS News program "Face the Nation" that the three members of the panel "were all appalled by the absence of the kind of alertness and vigilance to his job and to these policies that one expects of a President."

"We do not regard him as a mental case, but we regard him as a person who didn't do his job," Mr. Muskie said.